

# William C. Lee, “Father of the Airborne”

Series: Aviation



*Courtesy General William C. Lee Memorial Commission Inc.*

Some North Carolina aviation pioneers made history without ever flying an airplane. Pioneer Tiny Broadwick didn't fly planes—she jumped from them! In fact, she was the first woman to parachute from an aircraft. Pioneer William C. Lee didn't just jump from planes, he recruited other men to jump, too. Lee helped establish the first paratrooper division in the United States military.

William C. Lee was born on March 12, 1895. He grew up in Dunn, Harnett County, and excelled in baseball. In 1918 he married his childhood sweetheart, Dava Johnson. Lee enlisted in the army when he was in college. He served in World War I as a second lieutenant in the infantry. After the war he remained in the army and had various assignments, including a tour of duty in Panama.

Lee attended tank school in 1930 and then traveled to France for advanced training. Tanks were fairly new weapons at that time, and Lee became an expert in armored combat theory. When he returned to the United States, he taught at the Army Tank and Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Lee advanced through the ranks. In 1939 he was assigned to the Office of the Chief of Infantry in Washington, D.C., as an expert on armored combat. He soon grew interested in another innovative tactic—airborne troops. At the onset of World War II, Germany and Russia were testing the use of paratroopers. Lee studied the use of an airborne infantry, and when President Franklin Roosevelt decided that America needed paratroopers, Lee was put in charge of the project.

In June 1940 Lee organized the first test platoon of paratroopers. This early training program proved successful, and so the War Department created the Provisional Parachute Group in spring 1941. This group became the United States Airborne Command in March 1942. The new division, which was based at Fort Bragg, had to contend with shortages of all kinds, from lack of training to lack of parachutes. But there was no shortage of leadership. Lee's effective supervision of

the airborne earned him the Distinguished Service Medal and the rank of major general.

Lee next assumed command of the 101st Airborne Division. In 1943 he planned the airborne phase of Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy.

Paratrooper training was the most grueling preparation in the military. Lee trained alongside his men and was prepared to make the jump with them. But he suffered a heart attack on February 5, 1944, and had to miss the June invasion. To honor their stricken leader, the men of the 101st shouted "Bill Lee!" as they jumped over Normandy.

Lee retired from the army in December 1944. In 1945 the distinguished military leader was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from North Carolina State University. Lee died in 1948. Today his former home in Dunn is the General William C. Lee Airborne Museum.